

Missing Gruff

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Summary: Several days have passed since Gruff went to sleep and Fawn is feeling depressed. Her closest friends attempt to cheer her up.

1. Chapter 1

****Chapter 1****

Soft golds and pinks mottled the morning sky as Tinker Bell flew toward the beach where Lost Things washed up. A joy she hadn't experienced for many days bubbled up within her. The Winter fairies were returning from the Mainland later that day and everyone in Pixie Hollow was preparing for their welcome home celebration.

_It feels like it's been forever since I've seen Periwinkle, _Tink thought as she alighted upon the sand. Waves softly lapped the shore. The emerging sun dappled the deep blue waters with sparkles that looked like pixie dust. _I can't wait to tell her about the danger we were all in and how Gruff saved us. I wish she could have met him!_

A familiar sadness pinched her heart. She and her friends would never see him again in their lifetimes but the one who'd taken it the hardest was Fawn. She hadn't left her cottage for days. Tink planned on making something to cheer her up but she wasn't sure what. The only Lost Thing she spotted was a piece of white canvas lying in a crumpled heap on the sand. Tink flew over to it for a better look. The thick fabric was slightly damp but she figured it was still useful.

The only problem was its size. Once she managed to stretch it out, tugging each side, her muscles burning and skin growing slick with sweat, it was at least half the length of Pixie Hollow's amphitheater.

Tink settled on the sand to rest from her effort and yanked at her bangs. Didn't human artists paint pictures on such things? The fairy art talents had their own canvases, usually made from leaves or flower petals. Whatever was painted onto this would be seen for miles for all of Pixie Hollow to admire. But what should it be a portrait of?

Excitement pulsed through Tink as an idea came to her. She had to show this to her friends but couldn't carry it on her own. Before taking off, she made sure the canvas was far enough from the water so it wouldn't get washed away when the tide shifted.

She dashed past impossibly tall palm trees and headed toward Sunflower Meadow. Many fairies and sparrow men were already up, fluttering about and tending to their duties. Garden talents painted flowers, animal talents tussled with rabbits and chipmunks, and water and light fairies worked together to weave rainbows.

But where were Silvermist, Iridessa, Rosetta, and Vidia? She had hoped to find Fawn bathing baby birds or teaching newborn bunnies to hop but didn't see her amongst the animal fairies. After some searching, she found the four of them, minus Fawn, gathered on a large lily pad in the middle of Havendish Stream.

"There you are, Daisy Top," Rosetta said as Tink landed beside them. The pad shifted slightly beneath her feet.

"We went to your house this morning to see if you wanted to come with us to visit Fawn but you were already gone," said Silvermist.

Tink's heart plummeted. She swallowed, struggled to force words to form but they dissolved in her throat. From the looks on her friends' faces, she didn't have to ask.

"We're so worried about her," said Iridessa, twisting her fingers. "This isn't like her at all. She just hasn't been the same since Gruff."

Tink gulped again, finally finding her voice. "Did she say anything to you guys?"

"All she did was grumble about needing more sleep, that briefly dying took so much out of her," Vidia said, crossing her arms. "She still won't get out of bed. Believe me, I tried."

"You should have seen Miss Whirlwind here," Rosetta said with a sound that was part laugh, part sob. "She stirred up a tornado that made this huge mess but that didn't even phase Fawn. She just clutched her blanket tighter and rolled over."

"It's such a shame," said Silvermist, her eyes glossy with tears. "She's going to miss the return of the Winter fairies and the party we all have planned."

"Perhaps we should get a healing talent to look at her," suggested Iridessa. "If she keeps this up, she'll sleep as long as Gruff."

Tink brightened, remembering what she wanted to tell them. "Guys, I have an idea." They all stared at her. "It might cheer up Fawn and

also add to the party's decorations. This is probably a longshot but it's worth at least trying."

"What is it, Sugarplum?" Rosetta's eyes sparkled.

Tink grinned. "Just follow me."

She took off at top speed toward the beach, feeling the fragrant air brush against her face and stir her bangs. She glanced back just once to see the others following close behind, forming streaming trails of pixie dust.

The waves continued their constant lapping but luckily were still a ways from the canvas. She landed beside it. The others looked at her curiously.

"It's a giant cloth," said Vidia, wrinkling her nose.

"Yeah, and it needs a splash of color." Rosetta flew over it back and forth, studying it as if it were a flower she were about to paint.

"That's the idea," said Tink, so excited that her voice shook. "We could make a portrait of Gruff and, using pixie dust, hang it in the sky for everyone to see."

"Oh, oh, that's a wonderful idea!" Silvermist jumped up and down, clapping her hands. "Fawn will love it."

"Well, if that won't cheer her up I don't know what will," said Rosetta.

"One problem." Vidia scowled. "None of us are art talents."

"She's right," said Iridessa. "This could end up a huge mess."

Tink refused to let this daunt her as she thought back over all the inventions she'd come up with, which started with blueprint designs. "Well, at least it will be from us. We are the ones who really got to know Gruff." Her mind churned, attempting to figure out the best way to approach this. "It won't be just a drawing. We couldâ€¦ I know. Use reeds and dandelion fluff for his furâ€¦"

"And rose thorns for his teeth and claws," said Rosetta.

"That's brilliant!" said Silvermist. "And what aboutâ€¦?" She wrinkled her forehead as if struggling to think of something.

"Sunflower seeds would work for his nose, I think," said Iridessa.

"Those are all great suggestions." The joy Tink experienced every time she came up with an idea for a new invention pumped through her. "We'd better get busy if we want to have this ready for tonight's celebration. But first let's move it away from the water."

She and the others flew above the canvas, spilling pixie dust over it. It floated into the air, undulating like a ship's sail against a faint zephyr. They each grabbed an end and dragged it into Pixie

Hollow, onto a wide stretch of ground near Sunflower Meadow.

After Vidia used her wind to blow off the pixie dust so it wouldn't float away, they fluttered about, collecting the items they needed. Several fairies and sparrow men gathered around to watch as, little by little, they created Gruff's likeness onto the canvas.

"He's still missing eyes," Tink said, standing back to admire their work.

"What about dewdrops?" suggested Silvermist.

"No, Sweetpea," said Rosetta, shaking her head. "You're on the right track but the color's all wrong. His eyes were green. Oh, of course! What about dewdrops on top of leaves?"

Tink thought this over. "That's not bad but Gruff's eyes glowed, remember? There's this cave in the Winter Woods that is filled with glowing crystals. Peri showed me them once. They come in different colors, including green. Those would be perfect!"

"Let's go get our coats then," said Rosetta, turning to flutter away. "We'll all meet at the border. It looks like we'll have to frost each other's wings, like you and Fawn did when you went there with Gruff."

"Wait!" said Tink. "Haven't you heard? Zarina just came up with a dust that will make us immune to the cold. We'll be just like the Winter fairies when we enter and it'll protect our wings too."

"Zarina," murmured Vidia. "I haven't seen her in ages, not since she became so obsessed with that idea to make a dust that will mend broken wings."

"That would be a great gift for Lord Milori," said Silvermist, grinning.

"It would be," said Iridessa. "And I'll bet Queen Clarion's dying to see him again."

"And I can't wait to see Sled!" Rosetta's cheeks flushed as bright as her hair. "It's been way too long."

"Okay, let's pay Zarina a visit," said Tink, leading the way as they all took off in the direction of her house.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Zarina was startled awake by a noise from outside to find she was hunched over her worktable. She had fallen asleep again while working late into the night. The sun glaring through the window painfully stabbed at her eyes.

She sighed in frustration. The table was a mess, scattered with her lab equipment and countless failed ingredients: crushed flower petals, broken seashells, seeds, feathers, sand, dried leaves, and

toadstool slivers. Usually when she had an idea for a pixie dust potion, she instinctively knew the ingredients she would need. But, for some reason, the cure for broken wings remained elusive.

Zarina had been struggling with this for months yet, despite some false breakthroughs, she was still no closer to that discovery than when she'd started. She'd longed to have it ready in time for the Winter fairies' return from the Mainland. What a wonderful surprise it would be for Lord Milori! But, since the celebration was tonight, it didn't look as if that would happen.

Brushing a stray lock of hair from her eyes, Zarina opened her journal and scanned her notes for what had to be the thousandth time. She'd spent the last several weeks studying every book on Dustology and experimenting with different ingredients, only leaving her lab for quick meals.

She glanced up at the long shelf lined with several vials containing different pixie dust colors. Ever since Zarina had returned from her adventures, she'd come up with many more uses for pixie dust that went beyond changing and enhancing talents. These included cures for ailments and dusts that allowed the Winter and Warm fairies to visit one another's seasons without harm.

So why was a dust for wing repair so difficult? Were broken wings just never meant to be healed unless a fairy was lucky enough to have Arrived as a twin like Tinker Bell and Periwinkle?

Zarina recalled the frustration she'd had with her experiments before she'd discovered the use of blue dust. But not even blue dust worked for this.

Loud knocking and giggling from outside dragged her from her thoughts. She scurried to the door, feeling surprisingly grateful for the interruption. She had grown used to fairies and sparrow men dropping by at random times to put in requests for different kinds of dusts since she was, so far, Pixie Hollow's only Pixie Dust Alchemist.

Her heart leaped when she opened her door to find Tink, Silvermist, Iridessa, Vidia, and Rosetta standing there.

"Hey, Zarina," Tink said in a cheerful tone that sounded forced. Zarina stepped aside to let them enter.

"Hi." Zarina tensed. Where was Fawn? She wondered if she should ask. The six of them were practically inseparable, except when performing the tasks pertaining to their individual talents. Was it really any of her business? She'd been feeling alienated from the group for a while now but couldn't quite place when that started.

"My, you have been busy, Sugar," Rosetta said, fluffing her curls as she studied the vials. "No wonder you haven't had time for anything else."

A slight twinge twisted in Zarina's chest.

"That reminds me," said Tink, glancing over the cluttered worktable. Zarina's face grew hot. But then she instantly felt silly. How often had she seen the messes that Tink made with all her tinkering?

"How's the broken wing cure coming along?"

Zarina shrugged. "I'm still working on it."

"So I see," said Vidia, raising an eyebrow. She leaned against a wall with her arms folded.

An awkward silence filled the room.

Zarina inhaled a breath she hadn't realized she was holding when Silvermist spoke. "We're on our way to the Winter Woods to get some special ice crystals for a project we're working on to cheer up Fawn."

"And we're going to need some of your special dust," Iridessa added. "We're so glad you came up with that. It's much better than wing frosting. No offence, Tink." She glanced over at her.

Tink smiled. "None taken, Dessa."

A sensation of melancholy wrapped Zarina like a cloak as she slipped away to get the dust for them. She forced herself to focus so she could carefully measure each cupful of the Warm Fairy Protection Dust and pour them into individual bags.

"Thanks, Zarina!" they all exclaimed as she handed them the rations.

"You're the best!" Tink added just before they flew off, headed toward the Winter Woods.

Zarina's throat tightened as she watched them go. _They are working on some sort of project and didn't ask me to join them. When did we_ _become estranged? _She reluctantly returned to her worktable. They'd all been so close when she returned with them to Pixie Hollow after having spent a year with the pirates. She knew her fairy friends had completely forgiven her for stealing the blue dust and temporarily turning against them so that couldn't be it. Had she done something else to upset them?

A sudden realization struck her like a blow to the head. She'd been so obsessed with working on that pixie dust wing cure and other alchemy projects that she'd alienated her friends. So much so that she'd even missed out on meeting Gruff, the famous Neverbeast, who had been so dear to Fawn.

_Fawn! No wonder she wasn't with them, _Zarina thought, feeling a clenching around her heart. _That's why the others are making something to cheer her up. _

Her memories raced back to that time. She had only shown up at the last minute with the rest of Pixie Hollow, minus the Winter fairies, just as he was going to sleep. But it was Fawn, Tink, Silvermist, Iridessa, Vidia, and Rosetta, along with the scout Nyx, who had entered the cave with him to say their final farewells while Zarina watched from the sidelines with everyone else.

A deep sadness filled her. _I _should _have been there with them_. That's when they'd stopped speaking to her, except for polite greetings and to ask how her work was going. Fawn had been especially

distant, yet Zarina had no idea what to say to her.

Guilt gnawed at her. She owed everything to these friends. If it wasn't for them, she'd be dead at the bottom of the sea. And, instead of ratting her out for stealing the blue dust, they'd expressed to Queen Clarion and Fairy Gary just how important her talent was. Her accomplishments with pixie dust would never have happened if it wasn't for them.

Zarina brushed aside the leaf-curtain that separated her lab from the rest of the house and crept to a large chest at the foot of her bed. Mixed feelings stirred as she lifted the lid. Her decorative sword lay on top of a blue, gold-trimmed coat, a short dress, corset, and a white blouse. Her pirate captain attire. That was part of a life she'd permanently left behind.

Sudden anger surged as her thoughts turned to James. For an entire year she'd believed he was her closest friend, her only friend. Until he had betrayed her.

Zarina choked out a bitter laugh. James almost never crossed her mind these days. I've moved past him. She turned toward the long mirror on the wall. He's not worth my time.

She took note of her colorful lab coat, made to resemble the different colored dusts she worked with, and the shimmering, matching tunic and leggings beneath it. She'd even gone back to wearing her hair up in a messy topknot.

Zarina tugged her hair loose and shook it out, allowing it to flow in unruly waves past her shoulders. Her friends were on a mission and she would not be left out this time. Perhaps a break from her current project would do some good.

It had been months since she'd last worn her pirate dress but she quickly changed into it. She opted to leave the sword behind. What dangers would they face in Pixie Hollow? Zarina fixed herself a ration of the Warm Fairy Protection Dust then slipped a few other dusts into her pocket just in case.

She sped off toward the Winter Woods.

3. Chapter 3

****Chapter 3****

It took great effort for Fawn to heave herself out of bed. Grief still sat like a weight on her chest. She glanced around her house, which was a complete mess thanks to Vidia. Books and knick-knacks scattered the floor and her clothes were strewn everywhere. Okay, Fawn, you can't mope around here forever, she silently scolded as she fluttered to her feet. There are critters out there that need you.

She shuffled over to the fringed dress she'd worn during her time with Gruff, which lay crumpled on the floor, but quickly set it aside. Rosetta had given that to Fawn at her last Arrival Anniversary party, along with the stylish boots, insisting she would look more fashionable.

Instead, Fawn put on her old brown leggings and orange tunic, then fixed her ankle-length hair into a single braid. She wasn't in the mood for "fashionable." She just wanted _comfort._

She ran over her animal talent duties in her head, pondering everything she'd fallen behind on these past several days: a nest of baby birds that were probably overdue for flying lessons, butterfly wings would soon require painting in preparation for the upcoming spring, and any sick animals that needed comforting.

Instead of filling her with excitement as they used to, these activities suddenly seemed more like chores. Her exhaustion returned and she longed to crawl back into bed.

_Gruff wouldn't want to see you like this, _she thought, dropping to her knees. _You have to get on with your life. Your friends are worried sick about you._

A twisting sensation clutched her stomach as she thought about how she'd grumbled at them, insisting that they leave her alone when they'd just come to see if she was all right. _Am I turning into the monster everyone thought Gruff was?_

Her gaze snagged onto a book with a leather cover that lay on the floor just out of her reach. She crawled over to it and leafed through the pages. Her heart skittered. This was the journal she had kept during her time with Gruff where she'd sketched pictures of him and recorded his seemingly odd behaviors. Sudden tears blurred her eyes.

She stood and, clutching the journal to her chest, forced herself through the door. The fulgent sunlight burned her already watering eyes. She nearly tripped over several green bags that had been left on her doorstep. Her pixie dust rations for the past days. She showered herself with the gold dust and felt slightly better. Her wings pulsed with renewed energy.

An unexpected joy Fawn hadn't felt for a while surged through her as she skimmed over tall grasses, flowers, mushrooms, and ferns toward the animal fairy headquarters. A blossom-scented breeze brushed against her. She whooped with exhilaration as she looped a few spirals.

But this feeling faded as she neared her destination.

"Hey, Fawn," called Buck, waving at her. "You're alive!" He and two other animal talents, Beck and Silverwing, sat beneath a large toadstool, shearing woolly caterpillars. Several of the furry creatures were lined up, waiting their turns. "We could use someâ€œ"

His voice faded as she continued onward, pretending she hadn't heard him. _I'm just not ready to get back to work after all, _she thought, hoping no one would follow her.

Fawn didn't stop until she reached the barren, rocky territory where she'd first encountered Gruff. She settled onto the ground, placing her journal beside her. _I wonder if Gruff is dreaming about the short time he was here. _She gathered several stones and began to

pile one on top of the other. _Will he still remember me when he awakens? _

* * *

><p>The chill of the Winter Woods tingled over Tink's skin as she and the others fluttered to the log-bridge that separated the two worlds.<p>

"Well, it looks like it's time to try out this dust," she said, opening the bag Zarina had given her.

"I hope it works," said Iridessa nervously.

"Why wouldn't it?" Rosetta reached into her own bag. "Sled's been able to visit me for hours on the warm side thanks to the Winter Fairy Protection Dust."

The cold instantly vanished once Tink sprinkled the silver-blue dust over her hair, clothes, and wings. She fluttered across the border, alighting on the Winter side. The air was pleasant, not biting cold. She suddenly had an odd sensation that this was all a dream and had to pinch herself for reassurance. Here she was, clad in a short leaf-dress with her legs and arms exposed but felt as comfortable as she did in the warmer seasons. _Is this how Peri and the other Winter fairies feel in their own territory? _

She was startled out of her thoughts when something wet smacked her in the face. Wet but not cold. Silvermist stood a short distance away, bent over with laughter.

"Okay, you asked for it." Tink scooped up a handful of snow, which was cool but didn't freeze her hands, and flung it at Sil. She turned just in time and raised her hands. The snowball dissipated into a fog wisp and drifted away.

"No fair," Tink called. "You can't use your talent."

"Says who?" said Sil, gathering up another snowball.

Tink flinched, anticipating a second slap of lukewarm wetness when she heard a distant voice calling to them.

"Guys, wait for me!"

Tink blinked in surprise. Zarina? She flew toward them, clad in her pirate dress.

"I want to join you, if you'll have me," she said, landing gracefully on the snow.

"But what about your broken wing project?" Vidia raised an eyebrow.

Zarina sighed. "I've decided I need a break. Look, I know I haven't been around much lately and I'm so sorâ€œ"

"You have nothing to apologize for," Silvermist said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"She's right, Sug." Rosetta's green eyes sparkled. "You're just passionate. There's nothing wrong with that." Zarina smiled.

"And I know as well as anyone what it's like to get so caught up in a project." Warmth filled Tink as she clutched one of Zarina's hands. Her thoughts briefly turned to Terence and how little she saw of him these days. But he was busy with his pixie dust deliveries while her tinkering took up much of her time.

"So, what are you all making?" Zarina asked.

"A portrait of Gruff, the Neverbeast," said Iridessa. "We're almost finished. We just need to find these crystals for his eyes."

"Which is why we're here," said Tink, glancing around as she struggled to remember in which direction the cave lay. Her heart plummeted as her gaze snagged on a tree that was broken in half. That was the place where Gruff had saved her life.

She continued looking around, her eyes dazzled by the drifts of endless white. This land was so silent and desolate without the Winter fairies. She missed the sound of Peri's laughter as she played in the snow with her friends and transformed the spiky, barren trees into glittering works of art with her frost. _At least they are coming home tonight, _she thought as excitement pulsed through her.

"It's this way!" Tink shouted, suddenly remembering. "Follow me."

She took off, flying with ease through what should have been frigid, wing-damaging air. The others joined her. _Thanks to Zarina, this is possible. _She smiled at her friend, who flew right beside her as they whizzed above the sparkling snow. Zarina beamed back.

Tink had to admit that she felt a close kinship toward Zarina, more so than she did with the others. While she enjoyed the adventures she frequently shared with Rosetta, Vidia, Iridessa, Silvermist, and Fawn, they never quite understood her. Not the way Zarina did. Tink recalled how it was _she_ whom Zarina had turned to when she first discovered that her true talent was Pixie Dust Alchemy, not dust-keeping.

And then there was Terence, who always supported Tink no matter what. _Does this make Zarina my best friend and Terence my boyfriend? _She remembered how Peri had once asked her this but she'd been too embarrassed to answer. _Perhaps I should have asked him to help us with this project as well._ A hollow ache filled her chest. It seemed they only spoke while he was making his pixie dust rounds and then just briefly. _At least he should be at the celebration tonight. Ironic how these two are the friends I so rarely see._

The sight of the crystal cave jolted Tink from her reveries. It stood in a copse surrounded by several spiky trees. Colored lights sparkled within its opening and spilled a kaleidoscope of rainbows onto the snow at the entrance.

"This is it," said Tink, dashing into the cave. The others gasped as they followed. Incandescent crystals, which came in all sizes and colors, surrounded them. Countless more embedded the walls and

impossibly high ceiling, making it appear like the night sky.

"It's so beautiful," Silvermist gasped.

"It is. But I just hope it's safe." Iridessa's voice trembled. "What if these walls collapse on us?"

"We'll be fine," said Tink, fluttering from crystal to crystal, trying to figure out which would be best for Gruff's eyes. There were so many different colors, including a few she didn't even have names for. She focused on finding green but there were so many different shades of that color scattered throughout that she was beginning to feel overwhelmed.

She turned to Rosetta. "Ro, you're good with colors. Which do you think would be best?"

A pensive look crossed her face. "Well, my specialty is flowers but I'll give this a whirl." She fluttered about the cave, studying several crystals. "There!" she finally shouted, pointing at one stuck to the ceiling. It hung downward like a stubby stalactite and emanated a rich emerald green glow.

"That's perfect!" exclaimed Tink, triumph filling her. This quickly faded as she tugged at the crystal. It wouldn't budge. "We just have to work it loose andâ€" "

"Don't you see the problem?" said Vidia, placing her hand on her hips. "We didn't bring any tools."

4. Chapter 4

****Chapter 4****

Now that Rosetta had done her job of picking out the crystal, she stood back as the others discussed what they should do.

"If only I'd brought my sword," said Zarina, "I could pry it loose. I didn't think I'd need it."

"It doesn't have to be a sword." Tink looked around, her glinting blue eyes reflecting the multicolored glows of the surrounding crystals. "Anything will do. But it should be sharp. Weâ€"ah-ha!" She swooped and grabbed a loose crystal off the ground. It shone the deep reddish-gold of a sunset.

"Are you sure that will work?" said Iridessa. "It doesn't look all that sharp."

That still didn't daunt Tink. She looked around some more until she found small rock lying on the ground. With a few rapid strokes, she whittled the dull end into a keen point.

"You're so clever," Silvermist gushed as Tink fluttered up to the ceiling.

She placed the tip at the base of the green crystal and grunted as she struggled to pry it loose. The makeshift tool snapped in two.

"Fiddlesticks!" Tink's face flushed a brilliant red. Her yell echoed throughout the cave. She flung both pieces to the ground. One shard struck another crystal, creating a chiming sound.

Rosetta fluttered toward her. "There's no sense in getting your wings in a tangle, Sweetpea." She reached out to place a comforting hand on Tink's shoulder but she drew back, fuming. "There's got to be another way."

"And I know what it is." Vidia lifted a large rock off the ground. She sped forward, creating a wind that whipped Rosetta's hair across her face, and threw it at the embedded crystal.

A sound like shattered glass sliced at Rosetta's ears. She pushed her hair out of her eyes in frustration, hoping it wouldn't end up a tangled mess. She spent more time working on her appearance than she cared to admit.

"Is it broken?" asked Iridessa, dashing between ice crystal stalagmites toward the one they had chosen, which now lay on the ground.

Tink bit her lip as she picked it up and closely inspected it. Between her green dress and the emerald glow that coated her skin, she reminded Rosetta of some exotic plant. Tink lightly ran her fingers over the jagged edges. "It's a little rough but once I get my tools, I'll be able cut it in half and shape it into Gruff's eyes. It'll be perfect."

As they dashed from the cave and took to the air, Rosetta noticed a swarm of white, black, and blue dots in the distance, glinting in the light of the late afternoon sun. She squinted and saw they were the Winter fairies and snowy owls, heading back from the Mainland. Lord Milori riding his owl and the Minister of Winter were in the lead. Where was Sled? They were still too far away for her to make out the rest. Her heart fluttered in anticipation.

But she had to be a mess. Sled couldn't see her now!

"Uh, guys." She had to shout to be heard above the wind dashing past. "Look." She pointed. "The Winter fairies are almost here. We've got to hurry."

Everyone increased their speed. Rosetta's rapid wings felt as if they were on fire. A sudden thought occurred to her as the border-bridge came into view. "Wait!" She slowed down and alighted upon it, still on the Winter side. The Autumn Forest, resplendent with vivid reds and golds, stretched beyond. "We still have that dust on us. Is it safe?"

"It'll take a couple of minutes," said Zarina, fluttering to the other side. "But the Protection Dust will dissipate in the warmer air."

Rosetta took a deep breath and crossed with the others. The air felt suddenly hot, causing her skin to prickle with sweat but Zarina was right. The discomfort quickly faded as they headed back to their spot to continue putting the finishing touches on their project.

"That's amazing!" said Zarina, flitting over the portrait to examine it from every angle. Gruff's large, eyeless face stared upward. "You guys are as good as the art talents. He needs a little more fur in places but otherwise it looks just like him. Well, except for the eyes."

"That's why we need the crystal," said Vidia. "Tink, what are youâ€"?"

"Um, guys, we have a problem." Tink held it up.

Rosetta and the others gasped as trickles of water ran between her fingers.

"Oh, no," said Iridessa, chewing on a fingernail. "It's melting. It's too warm. This was a terrible idea. We should have known anything taken from the Winter Woods wouldn't last."

"No, it's okay." Zarina reached into her pocket and pulled out a pinch of fiery red dust. "I brought some Winter Fairy Protection Dust. It ought to work." She sprinkled it over the crystal, which immediately turned solid again.

"Zarina, you're a genius!" Tink exclaimed, jumping up and down. "I'll be back in a twinkple." She turned to leave. "I need my tools to shape this into Gruff's eyes. You guys finish the rest."

"You got it, Tink," said Silvermist.

Once they finished adding on the remaining reeds, dandelion fluff, and sunflower seeds, they all stood back to admire their work.

Rosetta studied the intricate details of Gruff's fur and teeth then glanced at the two gaping spaces in his face. She shuddered. "He looks so creepy without his eyes."

"Well, not for long." Tink fluttered toward them, holding a round emerald crystal in each hand. She fitted them into those spaces where they glowed a brilliant green.

"That's more like it," sighed Silvermist. "Now that's the Gruff I remember."

"It sure is," said Rosetta, feeling a sudden twinge in her heart. "It's almost like he's back with us."

"Now we just have to hang it in the air above Havendish Square for the celebration," said Tink. "And get Fawn."

"I'll go after her," said Rosetta as they all flew over the canvas, spilling gold dust onto it. Gruff's likeness floated into the air. "You guys get ready."

Rosetta looked back to admire the portrait once more before she hurried away. She tried Fawn's house first and was surprised to find she wasn't home. "Fawn? Sugarcane, where in tarnation are you?" She lifted the bedcovers and searched every nook and cranny. No Fawn.

Rosetta stood still for several moments, mulling this over. _Should I be worried? Maybe she came to her senses and finally went back to work. _

Hoping that was the case, Rosetta sped off to the animal headquarters. Twilight spilled a glow like melted butter over everything. Animal talent fairies were finishing up their daily work and helping the critters settle in for the night. But where was Fawn?

_Okay, now I'm starting to get worried, _Rosetta thought, fighting the panic slowly rising within her.

She approached Fawn's friend Buck, who was bedding down a family of squirrels. "You haven't happened to have seen Fawn, have you?"

He nodded. "Yeah. But not for hours. She showed up late this morning but then left."

Rosetta's heart pumped faster. "Do you have any idea where she went?"

He shrugged. "All I know is she flew that way." He pointed. "It looked like she still wanted to be alone."

Rosetta's stomach was a mass of nerves as she headed off in the direction he had indicated. Was Fawn all right? She was surprised to find that she didn't care if she had time to get gussied up for the celebration. Surely Sled wouldn't mind if she was a tousled mess. All that mattered was finding Fawn.

She nearly collapsed with relief when she spotted her friend sitting on the rocky ground before a tower of pebbles. A journal lay in her lap.

Rosetta sighed and shook her head. Fawn was an absolute mess. Wisps of hair had slipped from her braid and were blowing everywhere willy-nilly in a faint breeze. Not only had she changed back into her tomboyish clothes but they were hopelessly rumpled. A mixture of dirt and tears smeared her cheeks.

Rosetta's insides churned. She strode up to Fawn and grasped her shoulders.

"You've been moping about for days and this has got to stop!" She felt her face burn what was probably an unattractive shade. "I understand Gruff is gone, but he's asleep not _dead."_

Fawn looked up, her large, golden-brown eyes drenched with tears. Rosetta melted.

"Oh, Sugarplum, I'm sorry if I'm too harsh but you've got to move on, get your life back. We all miss you. Come on." She took Fawn's hand. It felt rough and callused, with dirt under her fingernails. "The Winter fairies should be here by now. There's a celebration tonight that ought to cheer you up."

A flicker of relief passed through Rosetta as Fawn flashed a ghost of her old smile. She dipped her head into a slight nod and stood, grasping her journal. "Yeah, that's good. Queen Clarion will be

there."

"Of course she will, Sugar. I'll bet she'll be the first to greet Lord Milori."

"I have to give her this." Fawn held out the book. Before Rosetta could ask, she continued. "It's the story of Gruff. I don't want him to suffer again because the next generation of Pixie Hollow fairies thinks he's a monster. They ought to know the truth."

Warmth flooded Rosetta's chest. She brushed a few stray wisps of hair from Fawn's grubby face. "Now _that's _a perfect reason to attend tonight's party. And we've all put together a surprise for you." Fawn's eyes brightened. "Now, come on. Let's go to my place and get you cleaned up."

Rosetta leaped into the air and was pleased when Fawn followed right behind. The sun was setting, blanketing all of Pixie Hollow with a soft rosy incandescence. A full ocher moon hovered low on the horizon. Cool air, tinged with the blending fragrances of countless blossoms, brushed against her face as they flew toward Spring Valley.

She dipped low once they neared her house, a pretty pink cottage shaped like a bud ready to bloom. Rosetta kept the yard around it meticulously neat and loved having guests, even if they were her friends who'd been there countless times.

"I had a gown made especially for you," Rosetta said, her heart pulsing with excitement as she led Fawn inside. The dress, draped over her bed, was woven from soft pink and gold petals. They were decorated with shimmering embroidered patterns created from the finest spider silk and sparkled with tiny dewdrop jewels. "I can't wait to see it on you!" Rosetta held the gown up to Fawn, who stood back and wrinkled her nose. "What's wrong? Don't you like it? It goes so well with your skin tone."

"Wellâ€¦" Fawn twisted the end of her fraying braid. "You know how I feel about getting all dressed up."

Rosetta rolled her eyes. "Don't I know it. You'd rather roll around in the dirt and play those confounded ball games the clumsies on the Mainland like so much but this is just for one night. Pleaseâ€¦".

After several moments Fawn sighed and nodded, resigned.

"That's more like it." Rosetta lowered the dress and looked her friend over. "But first things first. What you need is a nice milkweed bath."

She ignored Fawn's groans as she herded her into the washroom.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

A feeling of apprehension overwhelmed Fawn as she fluttered behind Rosetta into Havendish Square. Clutching her journal in one hand, she

tugged awkwardly at her gown's decorative petals with the other, wishing she was back in her worn but comfortable orange tunic. Thanks to Rosetta, a portion of her hair was wrapped in a braided crown on her head while the rest spilled past her hips in a mass of curls. It was going back to a single braid first thing tomorrow!

Rosetta, garbed in an equally fancy gown of dew-sprinkled rose petals, looked perfectly at ease.

The festival was now in full swing and Fawn had to admit the place looked amazing. Colorful floral streamers were strewn everywhere. Translucent seashells, filled with glowing orbs courtesy of the light talents, lit the branches of the Pixie Dust Tree. Overhead floated an enormous banner draped with leaves. Fawn frowned as she briefly glanced up at it. What an odd decoration! She wondered if it concealed something that would be unveiled later.

Tables covered with scrumptious foods, cakes of every kind, amber bottles filled with nectar wine, and bowls of berry juice stood in the Square's center. Toadstool dining tables were scattered about. The cooking and baking talents had certainly outdone themselves. Fawn's mouth watered and her stomach grumbled as she breathed in the tantalizing aromas. When had she last eaten? She hardly remembered.

She made a mental note to fix herself a huge plate as soon as she had a chance. But she first had to find Queen Clarion and give her the journal. Where was she? Fawn scanned the crowd. Swarms of fairies and sparrow men, dressed in their finest clothes, filled the place. The Winter fairies had returned and mingled with the crowd.

"Sled!" Rosetta suddenly darted over to the handsome, dark-haired sparrow man.

Joy for her friend filled Fawn when Sled swept her into his arms and spun her around. She turned her head as they kissed.

Tink and Peri were seated at one of the toadstool tables, eating and chatting. Their identical wings flashed a blinding array of impossible colors. Queen Clarion, resplendent in her sparkling pixie dust gown, stood with Lord Milori on the Arrival platform at the base of the Pixie Dust Tree. His arm was around her and she rested her head against his muscular shoulder.

Fawn gulped and clutched the book tighter. _I can't interrupt them! _She bit her lip, tasting the berry-flavored lipstick Rosetta had insisted she wear. _Not after they'd been away from each other for so longâ€¦again. I should give this to her another time._

"Fawn!" The sound of Tink calling her name pulled her from her musings.

She was instantly surrounded by Tink, Rosetta, Iridessa, Vidia, Silvermist, and Zarina, all gorgeous in their glittery, flower-petal attire and fancy hairstyles. Fawn felt a little less awkward. Peri, Sled, Spike, Gliss, Clank, Bobble, Terence, and Nyx with her scouts had gathered behind them.

"Fawn, you look amazing!" gasped Iridessa.

"Yeah," said Silvermist. "So much better than when we saw you this morning."

Fawn blushed and hugged the journal to her chest. She was surprised when Zarina approached. It had been a while since they'd spoken, even before Gruff had arrived.

"I'm so sorry about Gruff." Zarina placed a hand on Fawn's shoulder. Fawn swallowed and peered into her eyes. They glistened with tears.

"Uhâ€¦thanks," Fawn said as her own eyes misted.

"Who's Gruff?" asked Peri, gliding forward.

An impish grin stretched across Tink's face. "You'll see. It's a gift from us to you, Fawn, and it will also show the Winter fairies." She turned toward the others. "Girls, are you ready to unveil our masterpiece?"

"Ready, Tink," they all chimed.

Fawn watched as the six of them fluttered up to the enormous, floating banner. A huge crowd gathered. Several fireflies, including Tink's buddy Blaze, focused their glows on the leaf-curtain.

She held her breath as her friends drew it aside. Gruff's face, as large as it had been in real life, was smiling down at her, sparkling with pixie dust. Gasps rose from the crowd. Joyous warmth filled her. He looked so real: every detail of his fur and nose was perfect. Even his eyes, glowing as if they were filled with emerald flames, seemed to stare straight at her.

"Jingles!" Peri placed a hand over her heart.

"He looks scary!" whispered Gliss.

"I kind of like him." Spike grinned.

"Whatâ€¦howâ€¦?" were the only words Fawn could form.

"We made him for you," said Tink. "To cheer you up but to also share with the Winter fairies."

The warmth in Fawn's chest rose to her eyes, making them water uncontrollably. She blinked hard in an effort to clear her vision, only to have the tears overflow, spilling onto her cheeks. "Guysâ€¦," she barely managed to choke as she dashed toward them. "It's like he's back. Thank you so much."

They all surrounded her, pulling her into a tight group hug. Fawn clutched the journal to her chest with one arm while the other wrapped Zarina's shoulders. Her happiness was so great she felt she'd explode in a puff of pixie dust.

"That is an impressive likeness of Gruff, girls," said Queen Clarion's voice.

They drew apart. The queen hovered before them, her wings and gown glittering.

"Queen Clarion." Fawn drifted closer and held out the book. "I kept this journal while I was with Gruff, recording everything about him. I'd like you to have it and eventually pass it on to Pixie Hollow's next queen." Clarion gingerly took the book as if it were a precious artifact. "That way all the future fairies and sparrow men will know what to expect. I'd like Gruff to wake up surrounded by friends."

The queen smiled. "It would be an honor, Fawn." She looked down at the surrounding crowd. The Winter fairies stood out with their striking hair and ice-colored garments. "There's an entire season of fairies and sparrow men who were away during your little adventure. Perhaps they'd like to hear the story."

Excitement flooded Fawn. She whooped and turned a flip in the air, almost forgetting about her too-frilly gown.

"Now that's the Fawn I remember," she heard Rosetta laugh.

"Peri!" called Tink. "Round up all the Winter fairies."

Shouts and names were called through crowd. "Slush! Rosefrost! Neva! Get over here. You have to hear this!"

In seconds Fawn was surrounded by a crowd of shimmering whites, silvers, and icy blues. Her friends were mixed in amongst them. Queen Clarion nestled into Lord Milori's arms. Even his snowy owl stood in the audience, his great yellow eyes focused on Fawn in anticipation.

Fawn, glancing up at Gruff's likeness floating above, cleared her throat and began her story.

****The End****

End
file.